



Timothy Snyder

Balancing the books

In the European political climate today, more than sixty years since the end of WWII, eastern European experiences of subjugation are often glossed over. This creates misunderstandings that could be avoided by an awareness of a common European history, argues Timothy Snyder. Then, solidarity rather than national prejudice would motivate public opinion on matters of European politics.

One of the problems at the heart of any attempt to build and maintain a "common European culture" is the "cultural differences" between the different spheres of Europe that date from the Cold War: how can one reconcile the project of "expansion" with the deepening of "European solidarity"? One view has it that solidarity is a matter of moral positions and positive action rather than simply a question of the correct redistribution of goods. To those Europeans concerned with solidarity, may I suggest both a problem and an opportunity: the absence of a common historical narrative in eastern and western Europe.

Although it might be difficult to pin down the connection with any precision, it seems clear that the sentiment of European solidarity has grown along with a sense of common European history. In some measure, this is the common history of epochs and events that concerned all of Europe, as reflected today for instance in the historical styles represented on European currency. More important, however, is the common history that members of the European Union have made together since the end of World War II. Although every nation has a different narrative of this common history, it is probably not too grave an error to summarise the postwar western European narrative in the following way: World War II taught the lesson that peace must prevail in Europe; European integration promoted both peace and prosperity as well.

What could possibly be wrong with such an account? As with every historical narrative, the starting point is very important. The starting point of this common European narrative is 1945. That year is, indeed, a moment when lessons were learned and is, surely, the right moment to begin the history of Franco–German reconciliation and, subsequently, the beginning of the European project. Nineteen hundred and forty–five, however, means something entirely different in most of eastern Europe – for most citizens of the states admitted to the Union in May 2004. For them, 1945 means a transition from one occupation to another; from Nazi rule to Soviet rule. It is the beginning of two full generations of communist rule, which for most people was no experience of political progress.

Nineteen–forty–five also offered Germany – and Austria to a lesser extent – the opportunity for a fresh historical start. West German – now German –

participation in the European project has naturally involved a particular attempt to redeem the nation from the atrocities of World War II. This has involved a special relationship with Israel. During the Cold War, this sense of redemption motivated both Christian Democrats and Social Democrats to pursue an *Ostpolitik* with the Soviet Union and its satellites in eastern Europe. Sixty years later, it may appear to Germans that this work has been, if not finished, at least honorably addressed. Germans, one might believe, have earned the right to treat their history as beginning again in 1945.

Yet few eastern Europeans can see the matter in quite the same way. After the Holocaust, the centre of Jewish political history moved to Israel rather than eastern Europe, and Germany's attempts to pursue a correct relationship with Israel (and with other Jewish communities) have had little significance in the East. Germany's *Ostpolitik* was not an attempt to engage eastern European societies, but rather to improve relations with communist regimes. It addressed itself mainly to the Soviet Union and to East Germany. Whether or not this was a fruitful approach at the time can be debated; in my own view, it was, on balance, the right policy. But *Ostpolitik* simply cannot be remembered, in an eastern Europe liberated of communism, as an especially generous gesture. The very policies that might persuade Germans that they are authorised to begin a new historical epoch in 1945 are unconvincing in eastern Europe.

Moreover, eastern Europeans know certain important things about German occupation that have escaped the western European narrative. Eastern Europeans know, for example, that the eastern front was more important than the western front to the outcome of the war. They know that German occupation policies were incomparably more savage in eastern Europe than in the West. They know that the Holocaust does not nearly exhaust the record of German mass murder of civilians. No Pole and no Jew, for example, would confuse the Ghetto Uprising of 1943 with the Warsaw Uprising of 1944. This happens routinely in western Europe. That the French do not know about the Warsaw Uprising suggests a certain limit to their interest in opposition to Nazi occupation. That Germans have not heard about the Warsaw Uprising means that they are unaware that German forces killed tens of thousands of civilians, and then burned a neighbouring European capital to the ground.

German historians and German elites know these things, of course. The problem is one of general public education. As long as the western European narrative of history remains unamended, western European publics will have difficulty understanding the actions of eastern Europeans. For example, the Polish choice to join in the occupation of Iraq (which most of us can probably agree was a mistake, including the vast majority of the Polish population) cannot be understood without some sense of postwar Polish history. The communist experience left Poles sympathetic to US arguments about liberation. Likewise, Polish resistance to a museum for German expellees is grounded in historical experience.

In both cases, the absence of a common European historical narrative, embracing both east and west, leads to failures of understanding and solidarity. German and French reactions to Poland's policy in Iraq generally referred to a mindless and reflexive pro-Americanism. In fact, this trust in the US grew, understandably, from the Polish experience of the Cold War. One sometimes hears from Germans, including German academics, that Poles are unable to discuss the expulsion of Germans because of a kind of national taboo. Polish objections to an expellee museum in Germany are even characterised as Polish nationalism. In fact, Poles are afraid that Germans do not understand just how

widespread expulsions were during the Nazi occupation and the two Soviet occupations. Poles also believe that Germans have not yet come to terms with the totality of events before 1945 that preceded the expulsions.

The future of European solidarity, in other words, depends on a rethinking of the immediate European past. Without historical knowledge of the East, European mass publics will be swayed by simple arguments flowing from national prejudice. European leaders, whether they know the facts or not, will be tempted to resort to such arguments in the whirl of domestic political competition. Moreover, it will be very hard for east Europeans to believe that they are full partners in Europe so long as their experiences in the second half of the twentieth century are not part of a larger European story. These experiences are sufficiently similar (within eastern Europe) and sufficiently different (from western Europe) that the May 2004 enlargement poses a new kind of challenge. Europeans must find a way to rewrite the larger narrative so as to include both East and West. This requires a confrontation with two basic matters of the recent European past: that the centre of the suffering in World War II was in the East rather than the West; and that for four decades eastern Europeans had to experience communist subjugation rather than European integration. It should be simple, one might think, to accept the full historical force of Nazi and Soviet terror. The European Union is, after all, built upon the premise that totalitarianism must never return. Yet in practice this requires some humility. One often hears the argument nowadays that the US can learn about total war and political terror from Europeans because they experienced the horrors of the twentieth century. This is true. By the same token, western Europeans have much to learn from eastern Europeans.

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